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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses and makes specific recommendations for teaching freshman composition courses. First, the teacher must introduce the subject matter of the course to the students in an interesting way. Next, the teacher must instruct students in the basic language skills, such as spelling and grammar. Finally, the teacher must instruct the students in the elements of style, including narration, tone, and point of view, so that the students will develop their own voice in writing and communication. (TS)

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RESHAPING OUR GOALS FOR FRESHMAN COMPOSITION

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As usual, there's a great deal of talk lately about what we're doing in freshman composition. Some of the talk is merely habitual; it's like talking about one's latest diet. But some of it is pretty desperate, because of declining enrollments in colleges and universities across the nation, budgetary crunches that force greater cost effectiveness and accountability, and a new generation of functional illiterates reared on the selective-elective relevance curricula of the latest decade. The difference between the past philosophizing about goals for freshman English and the present self-scrutiny going in most departments is that this is for real: if we don't get our act together quite soon, we will lose our audience.

We have already lost it to some extent: composition has been dropped as a requirement in many colleges and most high schools. But many entering freshman can't read or write well enough to continue their educations. Only if we find a way to teach them the skills they need can we justify the continued existence of composition in the college curriculum.

After the great push of the late sixties toward giving the student what he wants and allowing him the right to his own language, we must re-think our goals. But first, we ought to examine our audience (as we always tell our own students). As composition teachers, what is our classroom audience comprised of. How does it perceive composition? What does a student think freshman composition should do for him? After we pinpoint the audience, after we ascertain what the student wants, we can begin to draw some conclusions about objectives for composition classes.

Give the student what he wants. All right, to find out what students want from freshman composition, what they think its goals should be, I resorted to the obvious; I asked them. My husband warned me not to do it -- he predicted they'd have no goals. But I found just the opposite. They have all sorts of goals and objectives; it's just that very few of those are related to freshman English.

Perhaps your students are different from mine, who are mainly white middle class suburban junior college types, upwardly mobile in predictable ways. My survey wasn't meant to be definitive. But here are some of the answers I got when I asked people after one week of the semester what their goals were in my course.

"I was required to take this course for my major, but being a strong optimist, I hope to come out of the class a well-achieved writer."

Here's another;

"My first reason for taking freshman English was because it was a requirement, but sitting in the class these first few weeks I realize there was more to the class than I expected...I really didn't know what the class would teach me and now I see that it isn't like high school English. I'm going to have to give more time to this class than I thought."

Probably. And another;

"My first objective or goal I had for taking English 101 was to get through it so I could get an A.A. in Equine Management. I came into the course with the idea that it was a grammar and not a composition course. The only reason I signed up for it, was that it was required....Any requirement to write except for personal satisfaction was a drag. Mainly because reading it was a drag. Through this course I hope to attain a more interesting manner of constructing a paper."

Here's someone more specific;

"Learn to write easily. Develop a sense of direction of lieu of wandering aimlessly."

And someone interested in basic skills;

"Help me write better answers to essay questions in other subjects. How to express myself in such a way that people will show interest in what I write. I'd like to finish this course with the feeling that I could write satisfactorily under any circumstances. Improve my vocabulary. Get me to think of new ways to say things. Find different adjectives and adverbs to use in daily conversations."

Followed by something more far-reaching;

"I admit to taking this course as a requirement but being a author would be out of sight."

And back to the basis;

"A good grade is important to me. My eighteen-year-old daughter made an A in English....."

"English as a requirement was my first thought. I never experted it to be souly (sic) writing. I was trying to prepare myself for the kind of English I had in high school. Now that I've found it to require an imagination my interest had been aroused."

"I don't expect to look for any insight, for this English 101. Anything I may get from your instruction, I am sure will be helpful to my pleasure writing. The only thing I would hope to get from English 101 is a C!"

Ladies and gentlemen of the audience, thank you for your honesty. And now fellow actors and actresses, what have you learned from the audience response?

First of all, there's very little unanimity as to goals on the part of students. What little agreement there is, is with regard to the course as a requirement and the desire for a passing grade. After that, it's anyone's ball game, depending on previous experience and personal inclinations. Most students have no idea what to expect in freshman composition, and no idea of the course's content. Their previous experience has been in grammar, which they dislike, or in literature, which they now find might be irrelevant. They're frightened by writing requirements.

Perhaps that doesn't shock you. But it should. Suppose a student signed up for a French class, or a Chemistry class, or a Nursing class. Though he might be ignorant of how the course content will be presented, he'd certainly have some idea of what it was going to be about. He wouldn't expect Spanish, or Biology, or Physical Education. Yet many of our students, when they take Freshman Composition, really expect literature or grammar. And in no other course are the goals so separate from the actual content of the class. In French class, a student wants to learn French, not just to get a degree or to make a lot of money constantly. We need to keep in mind our students lack of direction and interest in our course or to satisfy a requirement.

Our audience has bought its tickets blind; it doesn't even know what it will see. The only thing it knows about the show is its name: Freshman Composition. No wonder it is reluctant to spring for the tickets.

What a license this gives the repertory company. We can put on anything, or we can each put on something different. We can pass anything off as freshman composition, and that's just what we've been doing. Now, however, we've got to stop. No longer can we deceive ourselves about giving the students what they want: they don't know what they want, and sometimes they don't want anything.

Our first job is to introduce them to the subject matter of the course, and to make it seem interesting. Their goals are larger and vaguer than the course, because the mental place where their goals for the course should be is blank; as teachers, we have an obligation not to give the student what he wants, but to ascertain what he needs, and to fill those needs in a practical way.

What shall we teach our student who expects nothing, wants nothing from composition but a passing grade? I think there are two areas we have to consider when we define or affirm our goals as composition teachers. The first, obviously, is simply the area of language skills. The second is more complex and controversial, but at least equally important; it is the area of human qualities and values. Let's call it grace in the use of language. Since this second area is far more amorphous and goes well beyond issues of skill and service into matters of style and personality, let's dispose of the easier category first.

Most of my students come to freshman composition lacking one or another of the language skills. They cannot spell or write decent sentences, they cannot organize thoughts into paragraphs, or they cannot identify a thesis sentence. Their incapacities make it tough for them in other courses where writing is required. Teachers from other departments come to us moaning: "why can't you teach them to answer an essay question, or write a book report, or do library research?"

Well, I think teaching those skills, so necessary to the rest of college, should be one of our first goals. We are a service course, much as we hate to think so, and we ought to perform our service more thoroughly. Students understand the service function of composition most easily, and so they are sympathetic when told they are learning something that will be useful in other classes.

Beyond college, some students will need writing skills on their jobs. Anyone who has ever read research in social science, engineering, medicine, or law knows how crowded with poor writers these fields are. Not to mention the incredibly poor images people project of themselves in awkward and illiterate memoranda, letters to the editor, business letters, and job applications. The simple skills of freshman composition justify themselves by their utility, and we need not make excuses for such pragmatic aspects of the course.

We ought boldly to declare at the beginning of the semester that we, like a typing class, are going to provide the student with a skill that will come in handy for him the rest of his life. After he has learned the techniques of writing sentences and paragraphs that we will teach him, he will use them unconsciously in other classes and situations. Perhaps sports provide a good analogy here. The basketball player learns to dribble, to shoot, to bounce pass, to pass behind his back, to duck the man who's guarding him. He practices long hours to master these skills. But when he gets into a game, he must do them all by second nature; they represent options for him in critical situations where he doesn't have time to think. Possessing the skills already, he chooses the appropriate ones and uses them unconsciously.

The spectator at the basketball game, however, sometimes sees that the whole is more than the sum of the parts: each player's skills add up to something. That leads us into the second area, the area of human values. What is freshman composition beyond a skill and a tool? What do the skills and tools add up to? Here we're on the thin ice of the humanities, ice that most students suspiciously fear to tread on.

But let's say we've taught our freshmen the basic skills. What is the next step? It is obviously the development of a personal style, a way of expressing himself so that he communicates more than mere information to his reader. It is the development of grace in using the language, analogous to the grace that makes a good basketball player stand a little beyond his teammates and become a star. Grace can't be taught to everyone, but that doesn't mean it shouldn't be one of our goals. We ought to teach it where we can. If a basketball player came out for the team, you'd teach him the fundamentals of passing and shooting, but sooner or later you'd teach him, too, how to play the game. Where to go on the court. What sort of strategy to use against an other team. How to set up a teammate.

These are the kinds of things we are teaching when we teach "useless" techniques like narration and description, figurative language, sentence variety, tone, point of view, persona, and so on. We can't teach every student to use them with the equal facility -- everyone doesn't make the starting line-up -- but we can teach each student to recognize their successful use by other writers, both professionals and peers. And we can teach each student, if we keep these goals in mind, to have some degree of skill and grace.

And for the student, as for the actor or the basketball player, skill and grace do something very important in the human area; they create options. The student who has learned several techniques for expressing himself is no longer a verbal victim: he can choose his point of view, his tone, his style. He can convey of himself what he wishes to convey, rather than merely a haphazard and inaccurate impression. And options create confidence: not to be trapped is not to be scared.

So what should our goals be in freshman composition, since the students don't seem to know? Ranging from the simplest and most specific -- the imparting of language skills -- to the teaching of grace -- our goals can extend out of the

classroom into the human areas of the student's life by providing him with options for self-expression, and finally by giving him confidence in himself and in his ability to communicate his uniqueness to those around him. These are goals we need not be ashamed of when we think of ourselves as composition teachers, and goals our students could share. If we make them our goals, the students will make them their goals, too.